Building Digital Estates: Transmedia Television in Industry and Daily Life

Paper presented at the ECREA TV in the age of Transnationalisation and Transmediation conference, Roehampton University 22nd June 2015

In this paper, I am going to focus on the transmediation half of the conference in relation to television in the UK. To a certain extent this presentation will be in two parts – the first will look at how the UK television industry are shifting in the way they position transmedia content, and the technologies it utilises, in relation to their more established broadcast activities. I'll then turn to think about how parallel changes are occurring at a domestic level, in the behaviour and attitudes of audiences towards transmedia modes of engagement and the expansion of television onto digital technologies. So it'll be more a focus on the way that transmedia manifests in lived strategies and behaviours, rather than how it is constructed into texts

In particular, I'm going to think about how the idea of 'digital estates' helps us explore the way digital technologies are managed to create transmedia experiences by both the industry and audiences.

TRANSMEDIA IN THE INDUSTRY

When looking at how industry approaches to digital distribution have evolved since the mid-2000s a clear evolution emerges. In the early 2000s there were multiple examples of transmedia storytelling, with the BBC in particular

expanding many of their key programme brands such as *Spooks*, *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* through gaming and online content. These attempts echoed Henry Jenkins idea of a story told over multiple platforms. There are certainly still some examples of transmedia storytelling emerging out of the UK television industry. Often these facilitate social interaction or act as marketing. Even those with clearer narrative functions, often have little direct input on the television episode. Not following the transmedia extensions tends to have no real impact on watching the television series at its core.

Instead transmedia strategies have become increasingly focused on issues of distribution and access. I've written in the past about how notions of transmediality need to take account of the way that the same content is now available via multiple delivery mechanisms (Evans, 2011) – television episodes can be watched via broadcast, downloaded via online stores or streamed via catch up services. Since the mid-2000s each of the UK broadcasters have followed strategies of proliferating distribution, working to ensure that their broadcast content is available across all forms of screen technology. After the initial wave in which catch up services were created, slowly these services spread to mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones. More recently this proliferation has been followed by processes of integration. In particular, the concept of 'digital estates' has emerged across the sector, both in the rhetoric of key executives and distribution-related strategic decisions.

In September Channel 4 announced a renaming of their on demand service 4OD to All 4. David Abrahams, Channel 4 Chief Executive, described it as follows:

"All 4 represents a complete reframing of our digital estate, to provide a more joined-up online content and brand experience. Linear brands will be seamlessly reinforced in this new environment for the first time in television."

- http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/assessing-the-health-of-broadcast-tv-david-abrahams-ibc-keynote

When All 4 launched last month, Richard Davidson-Houston, Head of All 4 and Digital Content provided a bit more detail into what this idea of Channel 4's digital estate means:

"All 4 is a new kind of Channel with an unrivalled content offering. Where else can you find, whenever you want – *for free* –classic Box Sets, catch up TV, live TV channels, original Short programmes, TV premieres and bonus content for your favourite shows? Nowhere else. All 4 is unique. We're beginning to redefine the category."

(http://www.channel4.com/info/press/news/channel-4s-new-all-4-service-launches)

Channel 4 are attempting to create a fundamental shift in the way they see themselves. Rather than a television broadcaster they are becoming managers of content that is spread across multiple distribution outlets but still form a coherent unit. The concept of digital estates is not limited to All 4. Sky increasingly uses the term in its job adverts for digital media posts (https://corporate.sky.com/ajax/handler.aspx?event=viewTeamMember&pid=4117b870d2b0414e906edb2241acab22#!lightbox/4117b870d2b0414e906edb2241acab22)

The BBC, meanwhile, although not using the specific term, are following similar strategies to that found in the All4 announcement. Over the last few years the iPlayer infrastructure has become an increasingly central part of the BBC's website. Just over a year ago, they announced that they would be transforming youth-oriented channel BBC Three into an online only channel consisting of a range of content including standard episodic series but also short-form and transmedia content. They took great pains to emphasise that BBC Three was not 'closing' that the shift from broadcasting to online-only was an evolution of what a 'television channel' could be. As with All 4, transmedia forms of distribution were positioned as indistinguishable from broadcast activities.

The term 'digital estate' is therefore gaining increasing relevance to understanding current UK television's transmedia strategy. It speaks of integrating multiple outlets into a coherent unit, a single entity made up of multiple components. The word *estate* is particularly interesting here. It conjures up a number of connotations:

- Of physical buildings or resources interconnected by an overarching coherent structure
- Of a technological infrastructure within those buildings
- Of something that requires careful management – estates don't run on their own, different assets need to be tended to and maintained
- This then involves people – the human assets of an estate in addition to the physical ones

- Of legacy and permanence, passing a stable set of assets on the next generation

At the centre of this is the notion of coherence, of turning multiple separate assets into a single entity – many items become a single 'estate'. The concept of *digital* estate complicates the physicality of the concept and speaks to the increasingly transmedia-focused strategies of broadcasters such as Channel 4 and the BBC. Stable, permanent assets are interspersed with virtual, non-tangible assets; linear broadcasting channels and traditional production processes are mixed with online-based spaces and the wider range of interactive content that they can facilitate. What is most noticeable about the emerging strategies of both Channel 4 and the BBC is their clear attempt to realign the comparative status of broadcasting and digital technologies, with the digital positioned as equal to linear broadcasting.

Here, transmedia strategies operate not just at the level of the text, it's happening at the level of the *channel* or at the level of the broadcaster themselves. It's about creating a digital transmedia estate of content and services – some of which may coalesce to form individual transmedia narrative experiences, but that seems to increasingly be less of a focus. Instead there is increasingly an emphasis on constructing different story forms that may be narratively separate from each other, but bound together by an overarching single transmedia estate – guided by a channel or broadcaster's brand identity and, in the case of BBC Three and All4, a single, coherent online space. Understanding transmedia in terms of UK television is as much about distribution as it is about storytelling.

The question then arises about how these strategy changes play out within the daily life of audiences. How does the idea of a 'digital estate' play out within home? How are audiences making use and sense of the proliferation of devices and services through which they can receive television content?

TRANSMEDIA IN DAILY LIFE

This question is particularly important because the changes in policy epitomised by BBC Three and All 4 are predicated upon stark claims about changing audience habits around portable technologies. When making the announcement about BBC Three, the BBC's Director of Television, Danny Cohen, justified it as follows:

> "there is a very big gap emerging between the viewing habits of the 16-24's and older audiences…Do we sit back as a legacy company and watch as generational change bites away at our impact or do we take a place at the forefront of that change?" (BBC D).

Changes in audience behaviour, particular younger audiences, were positioned as a justification for the BBC to develop their own digital estate wherein television is simply one of many storytelling spaces or distribution channels and, in some cases, a secondary one.

Often research into audiences is based on reporting methods such as questionnaires or focus groups. Whilst these methods are highly useful, they are open to reliability issues – people may misremember or simply assume they do something more or less than they actually do. This is particularly the case when

talking about what are actually quite mundane or ephemeral behaviours – it can be hard to keep track of content we watch without paying attention to, or which websites we flick between quickly. We're unlikely to remember when we watched what or what we were doing at the same time. So a few years ago I became interested in exploring audience behaviour through new, more ethnographic style methodologies. A pilot project was funded by the Horizon Digital Economy Research Institute at the University of Nottingham. The research team involved scholars from television studies and computer science and so had a particular interest in exploring technology-based methodologies to understand how audiences were making use of digital technologies in the home. We were interested in the transmedia journeys that audiences take from television onto other devices and seeing how households behaved in relation to the proliferation of screen devices. We wanted to position 'television' as emerging from a wider network of technologies, texts, content and people.

METHODOLOGY

We focused on the living room as the primary communal space of the sample homes. We used cameras – one focused on the television set to capture what was being watched and one focused on the main sitting area to capture what the household members were doing. We then installed a secondary wifi network which participants connected to – this logged basic information about which websites they visited, including the time and the device. We then connected the various data streams to sync viewing and online behaviour.

The original aim was to explore moments of multi-screening transmedia behaviour – to look at when and how audiences used a second screen device to look at content related to whatever they were watching on TV. What actually emerged was relatively little behaviour like that – instead second screen devices were used to build up and manage domestic versions of the kinds of digital estates that the broadcasters are attempting to build. Of course these domestic digital estates are far wider in scope than just television, even transmedia television, encompassing the gamut of online content from viewing to shopping to gaming, to social media. All of these forms intersect and emerge from the viewers' attempts to balance the social, temporal and content driven motivations behind transmedia viewing.

What is evident is digital estates are equally forming within the home, with often quite complex management strategies emerging as our sample balance the kinds of textual experiences they want with the social, spatial and temporal dynamics of their homes. These related to ideas of transmedia as *both* storytelling and distribution. We found examples of what could be considered transmedia storytelling, for instance, but they weren't as a result of concerted strategies by the television industry. Instead we saw viewers managing their own digital estates and creating their own transmedia storytelling experiences.

Horizon: How You Really Make Decisions (24 Feb 2014, BBC Two)
In this example the participants are watching an episode of a BBC science series called *Horizon.* The episode was about exploring whether human brains are inherently male or female and used a group of monkeys in an experiment. During

the episode, one of the participants started searching on her laptop for a YouTube video she'd seen about another monkey experiment. When the television episode was over, she turned her laptop around so she could share the video with her housemates. Here she expands the narrative of the television episode herself, based on her previous viewing but then shares it with those around her. She creates her own transmedia narrative experience for her housemates, thinking through which pieces of content would go together, but also constructing a clear pattern and order for that content. She doesn't overlap the content, instead creating a linear pattern from television episode to online video.

The Great British Bake Off

A second example of this emerged by looking at patterns of online use and indicated how transmedia experiences may be even more expansive. When looking at Group 7's online behaviour we saw them regularly accessing food related content, including the BBC Good Food website. One particular sequence of action tied explicitly to the BBC baking competition, *The Great British Bake Off*. The *Bake Off* has no real transmedia extensions, it had a recipe app, but that's now defunct – its website merely includes information on contestants and the judges and hosts short clips from episodes. The participants in our project, however, created their own transmedia experiences, extending their engagement with the programme through preparations for a group viewing. The group regularly watched *Bake Off* at a friend's house because, as they described in their subsequent focus group:

"I think we just wanted to have a social occasion, and it was easy to make

because all our friends like baking". (Participant 8.1, female)

During one particular week the participants created a complex transmedia,

multiplatform experience to extend and enhance their viewing of *Bake Off:*

Tuesday 16th September 2014	
Time	Website
17:50	Lidl opening hours
17:51	Google Maps
18:03	Google search - Bailey's cheesecake
18:04	Waitrose Press Centre Bailey's New York Cheesecake

They described this as a conscious attempt by them as a social group to create an

entertainment experience that includes television at its centre but also involves

shopping and baking.

Participant 8.2	Yes, and I think it's quite fun when we talk about what we're going to make. We're like, I'm going to make this.
Interviewer	Do you plan it with each other, then?
Participant 8.2	Yes, we're taking turns each week, really. I think it would be nice to try and make things on the show, but I think it just takes a lot of planning and kind of quite expensive, so we just kind of make what we can with what's kind of in the cupboards.
Participant 8.3	But I think it's made it a lot better because we didn't do it before. We didn't do it last year.

"I wanted to know when [Lidl] opened because I wanted to get some things [unclear] soft cheese, because I was going to the gym, but the class didn't coincide and so it closed, so I went to Sainsbury's instead and got the soft cheese." (Participant 8.3)

"We go on Twitter because I was watching Paul Hollywood. Do you remember we Tweeted him the first time we watched it. We Tweeted Paul Hollywood a picture of our cake." (Participant 8.3)

What is important in both of these examples is how viewers were creating and managing their own transmedia experiences, independently from those created (or not) by the television industry. There is clear effort to make television about more than television episodes, to extend their experience of a particular narrative before and after it's broadcast.

But there is also a clear hierarchy at these experiences' centre. The television set, and television broadcasting, remains the focal point. In the first example the TV programme has priority and so is on the TV. Supplementary material is on the laptop because it's already open but isn't played until the primary content is finished. It is only after the episode being broadcast has finished that she brings in the online expansion.

In the second example, the whole experience is tailored around the live broadcast of each new *Bake-Off* episode. There is a clear hierarchy between different transmedia components with the most tradition element of television, the television set, being at the top.

This hierarchy continued in examples where a transmedia digital estate was managed more explicitly in terms of access and distribution, rather than expansive narrative experiences. But it manifested in quite complex ways as participants made choices based on balancing what kind of experience they want with how easy it is to access certain types of content. Broadcasters are increasingly making sure content can be viewed on television sets, desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones. But this has ramifications for the

management of content at home. Now that television content is spread over multiple devices audiences now have to select and negotiate the best mechanisms for accessing the content they want in the space they're in and at the time they want to watch it. In our sample, this became a key part of how households managed the networks of devices, people and content that made up their individual digital estates.

In many cases this negotiation was quite straightforward but raises questions about the tendency for scholars, and more popular discourses, to dismiss or deny what are perceived as 'passive' forms of behaviour - we found a number of examples where participants simply accessed the content that was easiest to find because they didn't really mind what they watched. Normally this meant broadcasting for TV content – for instance in this household here they simply turned on what was on the television:

> INT: *Storage Hunters* is on Dave, so you watch that live, is that something you regularly watch then?
>
> Participant 6.1: During the day it will just be like rubbish TV while we're doing something else… you don't have to concentrate but you can watch it, but you don't have to keep following what's on

These moments of background TV watching were often twinned with similar 'background' digital content. These viewers used technology to create a particular kind of experience that is based on ease of access rather than what the actual content is. Here a transmedia experience becomes a collection of disconnected experiences. The UK TV industry has been claiming an increase in

'second screen' experiences where viewers use tablets or smartphones whilst also watching TV. What this example suggests is that such experiences aren't always narrative or content-based. They can also be about providing distraction or creating a general ambience of images and sound. The content itself becomes secondary.

This group demonstrates several things here:

1. On the one hand, such experiences are based on content that's 'easy', that doesn't require much attention. Content that epitomises John Ellis' theory of the television 'glance', that TV encourages a distracted form of viewing. That such experiences are based upon technologies that are easy to access, with that ease often becoming more important that the content

2. That a mode of engagement that requires little attention is sometimes desired and valuable. Such modes of viewing are often used to denigrate television as passive or worthless. Here, however, it is precisely what theses viewers want. Ephemeral, fleeting and potentially forgettable screen experiences can be deliberately sought out, can be the purpose of screen technology and transmedia experiences

3. Perhaps most interestingly, given the binary that is often constructed between passive television and interactive digital technologies, these more ephemeral, fleeting, passive, even lazy experiences appeared across ALL elements of such second screen transmedia experiences. They wanted mindless content on a smartphone or a laptop as much as they wanted it on a television set. At this participant said in their focus group,

ease of access applied as much to more 'active' digital technologies as it does to TV:

"if I've got my laptop there I'll use that instead of my phone [to access the internet]. But if I'm laying down and then I want to look at the news I won't go and get my laptop from my room, I'll just look at it on my phone. But then if we're watching a film I won't use my laptop really because it's too bright while we've for the lights dim" (Participant 6.2)

How straight forward a technology is to find, turn on and use becomes a key dynamic of managing transmedia experiences across all forms of content.

This was not universal, however. In other examples participants went to varying degrees of effort to manage themselves and their technology in order to have the viewing experience they desired. Sometimes this was as straightforward as waiting for their whole group to arrive. As one participant commented:

"sometimes if we're all watching [a series] together, if it's on live TV and there's a few people here we won't watch it until we're all here to watch it on Catch Up, so we do that sometimes. Even though it's on we wouldn't watch it until everyone was here" (Participant 6.1)

On other occasions, this negotiation became far more complicated, with transmedia distribution facilitating the management of both access to content and, as a result, the social dynamics of the household. This was particularly apparent in one of our households, a couple with a young child.

This couple's often complex use of technology to manage their access to content was evident in this moment. Unlike my previous example, where ease of access mattered more than the content itself, in this case it was the opposite. These participants used a combination of digital technologies to access specific content that they especially wanted to watch and be able to watch it together. In this example they wanted to watch the US series *Veep*. Their television set wasn't working so they used their laptop to illegally download it, and then put the laptop on a table so they could still watch it together in the most comfortable way. On another occasion their use of technology became even more complicated. In this video – can see the wife watching MTV's *16 and Pregnant* on the laptop (their TV set was still not working at this point). This was one of 'her' shows that her husband didn't like so she had to find a time for herself to watch it. The husband isn't visible on the cameras, but we could tell from the logging that's he's simultaneously watching something on commercial broadcaster ITV's catch up player on his tablet. Partway through the video we heard him shouting 'Go Andy Murray' and he later confirmed he was watching the French Open on a tablet whilst making dinner in the kitchen.

In both of these examples, there's partially management of content (how can I watch the content I want to watch) and partially a management of relationships (we want to watch different things). But there's also the space of the home and the routines of daily life – digital, portable devices in this instance become the second television set, a modern adaptation of older behaviour and a substitute for having a fixed set in the kitchen. These factors intertwine and result in the use of two different screen technologies, both of which take advantage of

developments in transmedia distribution to allow this couple of manage their

individual access to content within the rhythms and routines of their daily lives.

The portability of technology allowed the ipad to move between rooms, and

catch up allowed them to watch content that they'd not been able to watch

broadcast. In their focus group, the same couple reiterated this whilst also

commenting that their parents had a similar attitude:

> "If we watch it in another room [we] use the laptop, so when we eat in the
>
> dining room I have Breaking Bad on the computer, [we] watch it on there.
>
> My parents do that now as well, got them a laptop. They were going to get
>
> Sky in a different room but now they've just decided to use the laptop."
>
> (participant 2.1)

TRANSMEDIA EXPERIENCES AS DIGITAL ESTATES

This household, as well as the others in our sample, were constantly making

decisions about how to best access the content they wanted within the social,

spatial and temporal context they were in. In effect they were creating their own

digital estates and managing them by weighing up the options available to them

via transmedia storytelling and distribution.

- Ease vs Content
  - o Value of ephemeral, passive experiences.
    - ▪ When the actual content is of little importance, participants
      tended to go for the easiest possible access route – TV set for
      television and tablets or smartphones for online content.
    - ▪ This applies to both television content and web content –
      participants talked about using only certain kinds of online

spaces when they're also watching TV. Facebook, imdb– can all be used whilst also glancing away from them. Even games like Candy Crush have short periods of gameplay and so can be glanced away from

- o The desire to watch particular content can, however, come into conflict with the ease with which it can be watched – participants would, perhaps understandable, make more effort when the content mattered.
  - ▪ This even extended to participants creating their own transmedia narratives. When they were so invested in the content that they wanted an expanded version of it. Even if broadcasters didn't provide that option, they sought out means to create their own
- o But also sense of content having hierarchies which were managed – video clashes so needs to be watched separately (waiting on the Monkeys example). Not all elements of a transmedia experience are equal
- Management of relationships – I want to watch this, you want to watch that; I want to share this with you
  - o Familiar from the work of Morley and others in the 1980s. But now devices are being used to manage multiple interests. Who's in change of the remote control has been replaced by who's in charge of the TV set – multiple screen devices allows more flexible management of who gets to watch what when and how.
- Daily routines

- But the final example shows an added complication to this – that the mundanities of daily life (such as cooking) also play a role. These replicate well established routines but adapt them to the capacities of digital technologies and their potential to open up new spaces as viewing spaces. Yes TVs have appeared in kitchens, but the mobility of digital screen devices means the fixed TV set is no longer necessary – you can shift between spaces and maintain your viewing or you can manipulate the space in more ways.

These are surely not the only three, but offer a starting point for thinking about how devices fit into domestic digital estates and how transmedia television experiences are being created and managed by their audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

When thinking about transmediality in terms of UK television, storytelling is increasingly becoming secondary to strategies that proliferate traditional television content across multiple devices including TV sets, laptops, tablets and smartphones. Within this context, the concept of 'digital estates' emerges as useful for both understanding the industry's continual integration of online and broadcast services, but also for the ways in which viewers are using digital devices to manage the relationship between content, between themselves and between the spaces in their homes.

Broadcasters are increasingly positioning themselves not as simply broadcasters, but as providers of a range of content across a network of distribution avenues. Online catch up services and online-only content are

increasingly being positioned as as integral a part of their work as television episodes. Within the home, digital estates play out in slightly more complex ways. Audiences similarly construct their own estates of devices and spaces that allow them to access content on their own terms. They may even use these to create transmedia experiences of their own, to piece together content that is not positioned as part of a coherent narrative in order to expand their engagement with a particular text. In many ways this reiterates behaviour that pre-dates the turn towards digital technologies – laptops and tablets are now serving the purpose that VCRs and second televisions served throughout the final decades of the 20th Century. What is different is the multiplicity of technologies that are now on offer, that require a greater balancing out of their various capabilities to fit each specific moment of viewing. The examples here are only part of the picture, but raise the value of considering notions of management and to refine an understanding of how transmediality functions through industry and domestic digital estates.